

This Family Owes Wallenberg Everything *by Ingrid Carlberg*

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Judith Weiszmann, 83 years old. With grandchildren Adrain, 9 years old and Gabriel, 17 years old, in front of the Canadian stamp.(Photo: Andrew Francis Wallace)

When Judith Kopstein from Budapest was fourteen years old she received a Schutzpass from Raoul Wallenberg. But did she escape the Nazi deportations? Ingrid Carlberg tracks down the unknown girl in the new stamp.

The Schutzpass was hanging on the wall in the hallway. I used to glance at it when I visited Nina Lagergren while working on a book about her half-brother, Raoul Wallenberg. It was a good color copy in a simple frame. The passport had belonged to a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl from Budapest named Judith Kopstein.

Date of Birth: January 30, 1930. Height: 171 cm. Hair color: Blond. Eye color: Blue.

I too had a blue-eyed fourteen-year-old at home, born on January 30. Seeing Judith Kopstein's passport photo always jarred me. That tense smile, and then her eyes. They seemed to hold the life experiences of someone much older.

The passport was stamped and signed on August 20, 1944. That Sunday Raoul had been in Budapest for just over a month. He had arrived in the beginning of July, just days after Hungarian regent Miklós Horthy managed to temporarily stop the deportation of Hungarian Jews. But this didn't mean that anybody could relax, especially not the Jews of Budapest.

Early summer had been a horror. In less than two months Adolf Eichmann's special Nazi commando had deported 437,000 Hungarian Jews, most of them to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. As Raoul Wallenberg was putting his signature on Judith Kopstein's Schutzpass a new deportation threat loomed over Budapest's Jews. A date had been set: Friday August 25.

The look on that face. And only fourteen years old. I wondered: What happened after that, Judith?

I remember that I tried. Nina Lagergren dug deep in her ninety-year-old memory. I searched lists of survivors online, contacted researchers at the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center. But I found nothing about Judith Kopstein's fate.

Reluctantly I put the fourteen-year-old aside. Judith Kopstein was, after all, just a minor character in my Sisyphus-like book project Raoul Wallenberg. But every time I saw her Schutzpass, something gnawed inside of me. Did she make it or was she lost forever?

Then 2012 arrived, the year that would see the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Raoul Wallenberg's birth. The Swedish postal service wanted to issue a commemorative stamp, and designer Gustav Mårtensson contacted Raoul Wallenberg's family. Together they decided that the stamp would have several motifs, among them a Schutzpass. Nina Lagergren had a nice copy at home on the wall.

And this is how fourteen-year-old Judith Kopstein ended up on tens of thousands of Swedish commemorative stamps, later voted the most popular stamp in 2012. But in Sweden nobody knew her name, or her face.

Raoul Wallenberg is now an honorary citizen in many countries, among them Canada. Canada Post followed the Swedish example. In January 2013 a new Canadian Raoul Wallenberg stamp was launched, featuring the same Schutzpass as the Swedish one.

Geologist Ann Weismann in Toronto has been fascinated with Raoul Wallenberg all her life. As the daughter of a survivor she owes him everything. When she heard of the Canadian stamp she immediately bought several booklets. Not until later did she examine them more closely.

That face, that look. She almost fainted.

“It looks like Mother... no, it IS mother’s Schutzpass!

Eighty-three-year-old Judith Weiszmann, born Kopstein, still lives in the family’s white house in the Canadian city of Winnipeg. She was equally shocked. “I could hardly believe it was true,” she said when Canadian journalists picked up the story.

Soon a link to a Canadian newspaper landed in my email. A colleague who had read my book had done a fresh search on Judith Kopstein – and hit bull’s eye. My heart skipped a beat.

I found her daughter on Facebook, but the reply came from Judith. “Dear Mrs. Carlberg... I would be pleased to be interviewed by you.”

Judith Kopstein. Very much alive.

She suggested Skype and that same evening Judith appeared on my screen, in a frame as large as the passport photo. That same look on her face, now framed by grey-white hair.

So what happened?

Judith Weiszmann was the only child of Jewish timber merchant Andor Kopstein. Before the drama in 1944 the family lived in an upscale apartment in central Budapest, their family business in the same building. Judith’s father imported and exported building materials to, among other countries, Sweden. But the German occupation in March 1944 changed everything.

- There was something new every day. First came the yellow star and they closed my school. Then they confiscated our radio, thereafter our food coupons, our jewelry, our bank accounts, our business and lastly even our apartment, Judith Weiszmann tells me over Skype.

Judith remembers that her father had close business contacts with a Swedish director “Björkman” who left Hungary when the Germans came. Björkman wrote to the Swedish legation in Budapest and certified that the Kopstein family had close business contacts with Sweden and therefore the right to Schutzpass.

- I remember that we were sent to have our pictures taken and I remember the long line outside the Swedish legation when we came to turn in our papers. But I did not hear about Raoul Wallenberg until later, Judith Kopstein says.

The Schutzpass with its yellow fields was Raoul Wallenberg's creative design. By the end of July the Germans had gotten tired of the neutral countries' pretend documents and started demanding real passports for protected Hungarian Jews. Raoul's response was a new fake passport that would pass for a real one.

- That document saved our lives. In October Mother and I were arrested, but we were allowed to leave when we showed our Swedish Schutzpass.

The family moved into the Swedish houses in the International Ghetto and Wallenberg recruited Judith's language-savvy father for his security department. Judith remembers that she was introduced to Raoul Wallenberg in December and that he smiled at her. But she can't remember what he said.

In January 1945, after the Russians arrived, Raoul Wallenberg lost his freedom. The Kopstein family regained theirs, at least partially. Under Communism persecution took on another guise. But Judith could finish school and study to become a building engineer. She married civil engineer Erwin Weizmann and had two children. They came to Canada and Winnipeg in 1956, when the Soviet Union had crushed any dreams of freedom for Hungary. They soon started a new family business.

Judith Weizmann is still dazed by the stamp story. But she believes that she has found an explanation. She remembers giving a copy of her Schutzpass to Raoul Wallenberg's family sometime in the 1980s, at the dedication of a Canadian monument.

And what about that look in the eyes of the fourteen-year-old? I forget to pose the question but Judith Kopstein gives me an answer anyway.

- We were forced to grow up very quickly, those of us who were teenagers during World War II.

Judith Kopstein. Yet another story to add to the others. Why is it so important?

Last summer I returned to Yad Vashem with my family, the beautiful monument and Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem is a place where stories never end. Single lives and events made painfully real. The items. The pictures. The betrayals.

At the last stop, the Hall of Names, information about two and a half million murdered people is stored in black archive boxes. The goal is to collect them all.

Yad Vashem's strength as a museum relies on the sum of the specific, not the general, somber. Someone said that it takes a week to go through just the museum part if you want to follow the account of the Holocaust on all levels.

It is with exact details, not commemorative stamps and speeches, that you build a sound collective memory. And as with democracy, a collective memory has to be reclaimed for every new generation.

Yad Vashem. My fourteen-year-old has now turned seventeen. She never wanted to leave.

The collective memory of Raoul Wallenberg's deed is the sum of the details in the stories of Judith Kopstein and that of thousands of other survivors. They are equally necessary, all of them. When this foundation has been laid, anniversaries and memorials can function as a kind of lighthouses in the dark. regular and vital reminders of all the million details that prevent us from forgetting.

Ingrid Carlberg is a journalist and an author. Her latest book is "Det står ett rum här och väntar på dig"¹ about Raoul Wallenberg, for which she was awarded the Swedish August Prize in 2012, an award given by the Swedish Publisher's Association.

¹ "There Is a Room Waiting for You here..."